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ABSTRACT

This is a summary of the final report of the Urban High School Reform Initiative, a Federal effort designed (1) to review the educational and related needs of large city high school students, (2) explore the Federal role in urban secondary education, and (3) develop recommendations for a more effective Federal response to continuing needs of these students and schools. Provided are a brief overview of the Initiative's activities, an analysis of urban secondary schooling, and recommendations for Federal action in the areas of funding, school advocacy, and policy formation. (Author/GC)

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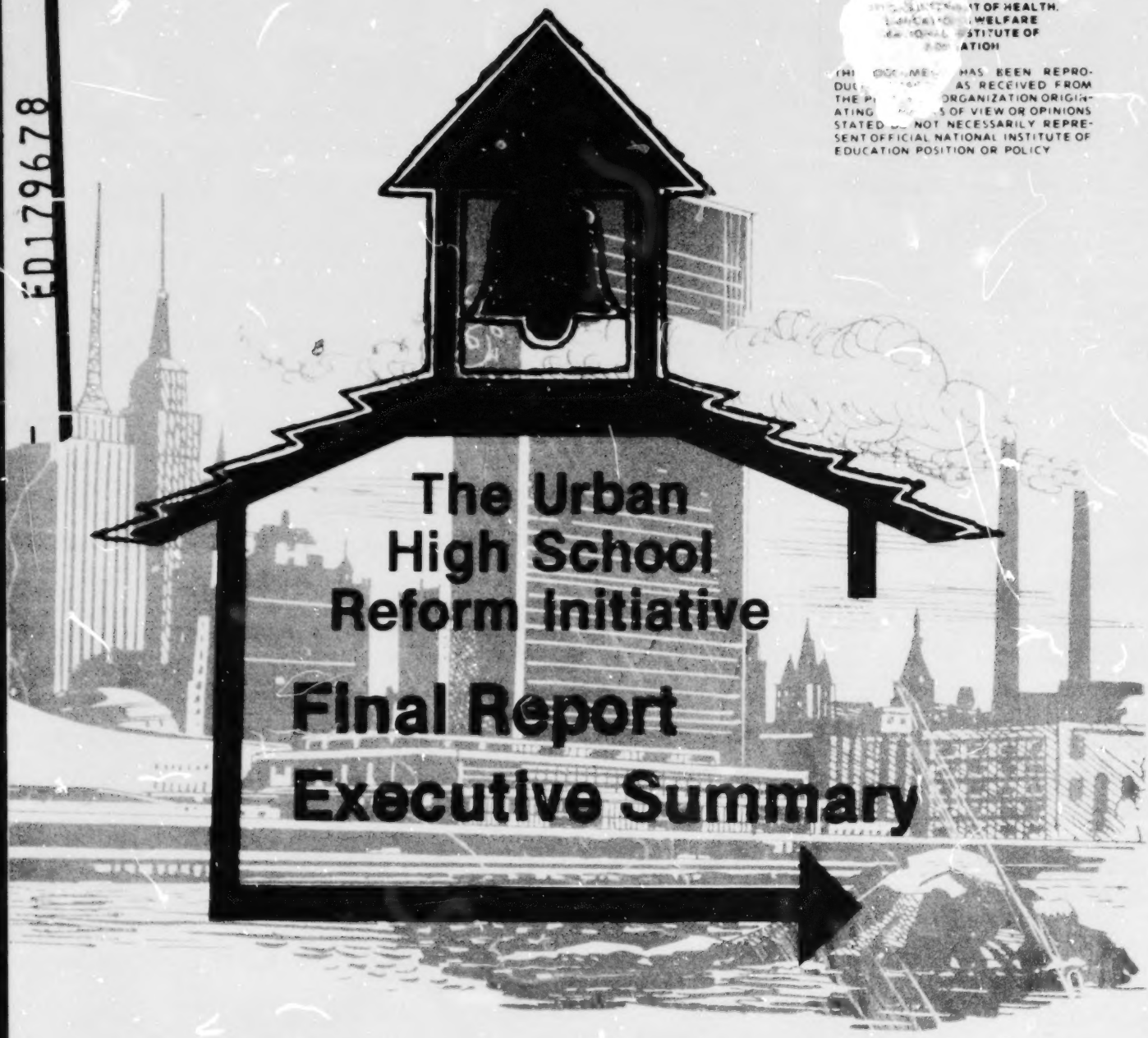

# The Urban High School Reform Initiative

# Final Report Executive Summary

**September 1979**

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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# The Urban High School Reform Initiative

## FINAL REPORT

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Thomas J. Burns, Chairman

September 1979

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"Bury them at twelve and dig them up at twenty." Perhaps you have not heard it before, but that remark is longstanding advice for all parents of troublesome teenagers. Secondary schooling structures have particularly devastating effects on inner city junior and senior high school students. Urban educational programs have not changed substantially in the last half century, in spite of the fact that contemporary city students resemble little their predecessors of fifty years ago. Many of those schools are turning out or pushing out teenagers who have scant hope of ever really "unearthing" themselves. Under skilled and largely unemployed, these young people, particularly the poor and minority students, are being relegated to a status of permanent dependency upon society.

Urban secondary schools house some of the most pressing problems confronting public education in the United States today. Successful inner city junior and senior high programs do exist, but they are atypical. Some of the symptoms of serious educational distress are:

- achievement scores lower than regional, State and national averages;
- alarmingly high dropout rates, particularly among minority teenagers;
- escalating incidence of in-school violence;
- limited postsecondary study and work options;
- continuing minority isolation and covert if not overt racism in spite of desegregation mandates;
- a retreat of urban middle class students, black and white, to private schools;
- a public lack of confidence which translates into dwindling financial support;
- urban school district bureaucracies that are resistant to change.

In recognition of the plight of those schools, U.S. Commissioner Ernest L. Boyer established the Urban High School Reform Initiative in 1977. The interbureau leaders on this U.S. Office of Education (USOE) task force hoped that the confluence of diverse expertise would lead to dynamic new directions for Federal urban secondary educational policy.

During its two-year study, the Urban High School Reform Initiative surveyed large city high school conditions and assessed the impact of USOE programs on those schools. Our preliminary, internal study completed in August, 1978, the Phase I Report on Extended Urban High School Reform, found that urban teenagers are likely to get an inferior

education and that USOE is doing almost nothing about it. Only one USOE program could legitimately be said to have an urban secondary focus: the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Education Program (ADAEP). Out of $11.3 billion in program funds appropriated for FY 1979, only one two-million dollar program was aimed specifically at inner city secondary students. Of course, some other programs devote a portion of their funds to the education of these young people. Yet there is no critical mass of federal funding support for urban secondary schools.

The mission of Federal government support and intervention in elementary and secondary education has been primarily to ensure equal educational opportunity for all. Particular attention has been paid to the traditionally disenfranchised sectors of our population: the poor, the minorities and the handicapped. While the fifteen years since the Civil Rights Act of 1964 have not eliminated the racial, cultural and socio-economic injustices in our social structure (a task many now view as an unrealistic expectation for a society's school system), they have brought us closer to giving disadvantaged students a fairer chance. Recent literature points to some successes attributable to the Federal compensatory effort, but the successes have been documented only at the elementary level. A few States, such as California and Florida, are beginning to concentrate new compensatory dollars on secondary schools. Policy makers in Washington have of late been considering ways that they can promote this new direction.

The Department of Labor Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) and Youth Employment Demonstration Project Act (YEDPA) are helping some secondary school students escape the confines of unresponsive educational institutions. If the public school system cannot or will not respond to these challenges, others will. Witness the voucher movement in California, the surprising stability of private schools in a time of enrollment decline, and the recurring prospect of tuition tax credits that would make those schools even more alluring.

The task of assessing urban education is necessarily one that includes dealing with broad social, economic and political factors. Demographics, employment and other measures of social well-being are reflected in disparities in basic skills and in dropout rates. We began to talk about this in the Phase I Report. We completed the analysis in Chapter One, "WHY URBAN SECONDARY", by citing these "Urban Factors" and by discussing current educational issues ("Schooling Factors"), the contemporary teenager ("Adolescent Factors"), and the status of government support for urban secondary education ("Federal and State Aid Factors"). A case can be made for overwhelming need in urban secondary schools.

The Initiative recognized from the start that local urban communities had to share responsibility for the education of their adolescents. Consequently, the task force launched six pilot outreach projects which are reviewed briefly in Chapter Two, "PILOT OUTREACH ACTIVITIES", and evaluated in full by team leaders in Appendix C. All six were designed to test the feasibility of linking the urban secondary school to the world outside: to the home, the world of work and other community institutions. We hoped that the pilot projects could alleviate some of the pressures that currently inhibit the schools' ability to teach youngsters how to read, write and reason. The pilot projects are: 1. Urban Feedback - to improve the sensitivity of Federal and State educational program managers to urban secondary school conditions; 2. Prevention Rather Than Remediation - to reduce destructive behavior among urban students through the development of "feeder" school environments that strengthen student self-esteem and attitudes toward educational achievement; 3. Volunteer Career Planning Networks - to encourage community volunteers to help individual urban adolescents with career planning; 4. Lifelong Opportunity Center - an integrated services delivery model to offer centralized educational and occupational information, personalized guidance and referral services to all age groups; 5. Urban Secondary Exemplary Programs - to identify and disseminate exemplary educational programs conducive to urban secondary school reform; 6. Legislation to Extend Urban Secondary School Reform - to draft legislation on the basis of testimony from urban secondary school constituents. Several of the pilot efforts met with considerable success and are being institutionalized. Others taught participants from the local, State and Federal levels some important lessons about intervention and innovation in urban education.

Federal government suggestions for reform must be based on (actually derived from) what local urban practitioners and citizens know they need. We listened to the testimony of nearly 1,000 people from 24 of America's 25 largest cities, 47 other principal urban centers and 25 smaller municipalities in Regional Urban High School Conferences. Ten big city school districts and USOE's Regional Offices hosted varying mixes of: urban secondary school students, parents, teachers, counselors, principals, superintendents and other district administrators, State and local school board members, other State officials, business, community organization and public agency leaders, legislative staff, clerics, respresentatives of higher education, and national organization leaders. They told us what they wanted their secondary schools to do! They alerted us to the school site-level problems they face every day and that we tend to overlook. It was our job to compile the findings from twenty regional reports and present them in such a way that other Federal and State program officers would pay attention and act on them. This we attempted to do in Chapter Three, "STRATEGIES FOR REFORM." The five major themes for reform are:

I. Shared Decision-Making through School Site Councils and School Site Budgeting;
II. Diverse Learning Environments requiring site specific blueprints for Educational Program Development and Professional Development;
III. School-Community Development including Networking with the urban community and Coordinated Youth Services;
IV. School Finance and Red Tape Reform to reduce management complexity of urban secondary schools; and
V. Research and Dissemination targeted for the extraordinary needs of adolescents.

Chapter Three highlights major strategies, enumerates important recommendations and synthesizes the roles of significant individuals, organizations and the Federal government.

The key to reform seems to be time: time for educators, particularly principals, to exercise educational leadership, to conduct needs assessments, to design comprehensive educational plans; time for teachers to innovate, to enlist the active involvement of parents, students and community members and organizations. Reducing paperwork and red tape can provide more time for other activities.

To be responsive to the diverse needs of its multicultural and disproportionately poor clientele, the inner city junior or senior high school must change. Rigid, traditional program structures must be diversified.

City kids are smart in many ways. TV, technology and complex urban environments make these adolescents "street-wise." It is tough to motivate them in four-walled classrooms for six hours, five days a week. Th schools must capitalize on the rich resources that abound in cities: the varied careers to explore, the museums, libraries, governing bodies, colleges, theatres, recreational facilities, sporting events and community centers. When this does not happen, too many city youth will prefer the immediacy of street life to the seemingly meaningless drudgery of their schools. To fulfill their goal of easing youths' transition from the educational process to a productive adulthood, the schools must work with and through their urban environments.

For this result to occur, the Federal government will have to refocus its own priorities to supply the high risk capital necessary to instigate change. Without Federal leadership and without real incentives for reform, the States on their own initiative are not likely to come to the aid of their troublesome city schools. Even with concerted State school finance reform efforts under way in more than twenty

States, researchers report that, so far, the measures are doing little to accomplish equalization of spending. They fall far short of achieving true funding parity for overburdened urban school systems.

Nor for that matter can urban school districts alone be expected to find the extra money it would take to revamp their secondary school programs. They are much more likely to "write-off" the adolescent "tune-outs" and dropouts as lost causes and stick to the established priorities of concentrating on the much more tractable elementary school children. But the gains being made in these inner city grade schools are being lost in the junior and senior high school. Steps are recommended to maintain the progress made in the elementary schools.

Schools generally reflect the socio-economic conditions of the communities they serve. Policy makers are aware of the intensity and complexity of the problems facing core cities. Federal and State governments are intervening with some success in housing, transportation, economic rehabilitation, employment and elementary education. Though leading social scientists have argued that schools can mitigate the social, economic and cultural disadvantages of poverty and racial bias, others disagree. There has not yet been a consensus of support for aid for the urban secondary school.

We in the Federal government must generate coherent urban secondary education policies that foster local capacity for reform, and that give local educators time, funds and other resources to coordinate big city education programs on behalf of young people. The first step in the development of the Policy Recommendations presented in Chapter Four is the legislative analysis, Federal Educational Law and Urban Secondary School Reform: Volume I. Reform Recommendations and Volume II. Federal Support. It appears in full in Appendices A and B. By matching major recommendations emanating from the Urban High School Reform conferences to sections of existing Federal legislation, we hope to meet three objectives:

1. To help urban secondary school practitioners get the best use from presently available Federal funds, as new urban or secondary legislation is unlikely at this time;

2. To make Federal and State educational program managers more aware of urban secondary school needs and more able to use their program funds to meet those needs; and

3. To determine what programs hold the most potential for serving as the bulwark of an effectively coordinated Federal urban secondary education policy.

Federal educational legislation is much broader than many educators realize. The recently reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is particularly progressive. It is certainly amenable to supporting many urban secondary school reform activities.

Regressive interpretations of the law at every level of government effectively decimate its potential impact. Federal, State and local program specialists are afraid to go out on a limb. Wary of legal complications and audits, they create the restrictive regulations and other administrative bottlenecks that defeat Congressional intent. Although not necessarily explicit in its reformism, the legislative language of ESEA could support all of our recommendations that call for locally initiated change.

Fully endorsing the tradition of State and local control of public education, Congress is not willing to give the Federal government the prerogative to direct this reform. It certainly wants the legislation to foster local educational leadership. Congress is also disinclined toward enacting direct or "exclusively urban" education legislation to the detriment of other constituencies. Broader aid to the disadvantaged in rural as well as urban areas is more appealing to our nation's representatives. But there is a "hidden urban agenda" in ESEA that is significant enough to warrant comments like those heard at a November, 1978, meeting of the Council of Great City Schools: "It's the greatest piece of legislation for urban education since 1965." That says something to us!

Unfortunately, some Federal program officers may not be as enthusiastic as they should be about the effort to help urban secondary schools. While we could blame the presumed suburban-rural bias of Federal and State educational bureaucracies, or the impetus to maintain the status quo that exists in any entrenched organization, we must acknowledge that many bureaucrats are hesitant about overstepping the boundaries of the prescribed Federal role in public education. The law prohibits USOE from exercising control or directing local educational practices. It certainly is not precluded from providing leadership, technical assistance and working models of effective programs.

A special initiative must advocate. We do not expect all of our recommendations to be implemented automatically - tomorrow. We do, however, intend to provide a framework for a strong Federal urban secondary education policy.

In Chapter Four, "THE FEDERAL ROLE IN URBAN SCHOOL REFORM: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS," we concluded that the status quo is not acceptable. The case has been made again and again for the needs of students and staffs of urban secondary schools. Nevertheless, we concluded (despite

our initial charge to propose new legislation) that at present it is unlikely that more elementary and secondary legislative programs could be enacted. We noted the flexibility of existing legislation. The best approach for the immediate future, we believe, would be the targeting of "concentration" grants and other discretionary funds toward urban secondary programs.

Our specific recommendations are:

1. Encourage targeting these new and/or untargeted funds to urban secondary school programs, coordinated with those of community organizations;

2. Establish a special advocate position for secondary school improvement, especially for urban schools (but without precluding aid to demonstrably under-served schools outside urban areas);

3. Develop a coherent Federal policy that gives priority for new funds or untargeted funds to the urban secondary schools.

New legislation would not be anticipated in the near term, but new legislative initiatives could well be an outgrowth of modest successes from the limited actions being undertaken without any special funding.

We believe that strong Federal leadership is necessary to overcome the inertia of all levels of the education bureaucracy: Federal, State and local. Combining internal advocacy with successful technical assistance activities is expected to lead to a new consensus on Federal priorities. Such a consensus could in turn lead to proposals that Congress would find attractive, creating new Federal programs in support of improving public secondary education. Targeting additional aid to a neglected level of schooling should not necessarily require reductions in the funds now allocated to students in elementary schools or in post-secondary institutions. Junior high school and senior high school students' needs, and those of their teachers and principals, must be taken as seriously as those of any other age group.

We, in the Urban High School Reform Initiative pose the question: "Why not the best for inner city teenagers?" It is a challenge that calls for immediate response. We hope that this report may serve as an agent against inaction and inertia, and as an incentive for initiative on behalf of the young people in our large cities. They deserve no less than our best efforts.